

Manjula Devi: Lady Pioneer of Assam from Sidli Koch Dynasty

Dipanjali Barman

Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of History, University of Hyderabad

University of Hyderabad, Gachibowli, Hyderabad, Telangana

Abstract: Focusing on a forgotten era of Assam history of mid 19th Century, we find a soul of majesty who devoted her effort in upliftment of women in Indian patriarchic society that ran for years- Queen Manjula Devi. Participating herself in active politics and organizing woman association, queen Manjula Devi played a crucial role by merging the women in socio-political activities instead of household work only. Hailing from far Andhra Pradesh, not being a mainstream Assamese, Manjula Devi took the frontline in the social cum political field of then Assam. In this paper we try to lighten up a glorious era of Manjula Devi, the generous woman from Koch Dynasty of Assam and her significant role in Assam politics and relevant work of social awareness.

Keyword: Sidli Kingdom, Manjula Devi, Women, Assam

*“Like art, revolutions come from combining what exists into what has never existed before”-
Gloria Steinem.*

How many of us know about the Manjula Devi? It is really very unfortunate that in spite of having great contribution towards socio-political scenario of Assam as well as for women upliftment she is hardly remembered by the people of Assam as well as finds any place to glorify the pen of any writers. What can be the reasons behind it? Is it because as she is a woman? But there are many examples of such women who have been embellish the writings of many feminist

cum Assamese writers such as Indira Miri, a lower caste Assamese woman. Then what can be the reasons? Is it because she was not an Assamese daughter but daughter in law of Assam? Or is it because as she was from Koch Rajbongshi community, a community who become a victim of negligence from Assamese mainstream since time?

Manjula Devi, the last queen of Sidli kingdom¹ was born in 5th January, 1912 in Andhra Pradesh. Manjula Devi married to Raja Ajit Narayan Dev, the last ruler of Sidli Kingdom in 1932. She was a social activist and played a vital role for the social upliftment of woman. But she is hardly remembered by the people of India.

In India's second general election 1957, Manjula Devi was elected as an M.P from Goalpara constituency. Manjula Devi was the President of Assam Pradesh Mahila Samiti from 1952-57, Vice president of Assam Food Council, Chairman of Dhubri Education Board, Vice president of Indian Conference of Social Work, Assam state branch and convener of the same; Executive member of National Council of Women of India; Member of NIA, Calcutta club; member of the committee of correspondence, National Council of Women, U.S.A. etc.

She took an active part in standing committee of International Conference of Women held at Reading in 1952 with a special invitation. She also started destitute Women's Home for Refugees at Rupshi, Goalpara. Along with these she also started 40 centers for welfare of woman.

Assam Mahila Samiti was found in 1926. Except in Assam there was no Mahila Samiti in entire India during that period. In 1946 a representative meeting of the samiti was organised at Guwahati where Bhubaneswari Devi Goswami was elected as president and both Chandra

¹ Sidli Koch kingdom was founded by Bhima Shingha, an ancestor of Jira Devi, daughter of Koch chief Haju of Hajo area and wife of Haria Mondol

Prabha Saikiani and Induprabha Baruah were elected as secretary of the samiti. After the ends of the tenure of Bhubaneswari Devi Goswami, Manjula Devi was elected as the president of the Assam Pradesh Mahila Samiti. She played a great role in Indian socio-political scenario. During Assam earthquake 1950, Manjula Devi did a great relief work. She did relief work in Assam flood as well. She had a major role in bringing consciousness among Assamese woman regarding their social activity other than household work. Due to health issue Rani Manjula Devi died in 1993.

Manjula Devi had a great contribution for the uplift of Koch or Koch Rajbonghi community. She took a great initiative for inclusion of Koch Rajbanshi community in the list of scheduled tribes in respect of Assam state but unfortunately the issue is till date an unresolved issue. Koch Rajbanshi who has been originally indigenous and aboriginal tribes of Assam still deprived of their schedule tribe status from Government of India as well as state Government.

With the creation of BTAD or BTC on 10th February 2003, most of the areas of historically rich Sidli and Bijni Koch kingdom has been come under BTAD (Bodoland Territorial Area District) and most unfortunate thing is that Government in BTAD or BTC has not created any major policy for political cum cultural protection of Koch Rajbonshi Community which is having significant history of past and thus the community is suffering from identity crisis in this region. As BTAD is created by consisting of Protected Tribel Belts and Blocks with protected class Scheduled Tribe(Hills), Scheduled Caste, and other major communities like Koch Rajbonshi, Adivashi and Gorkhas of undivided Goalpara District. In a democratic country like India, equal and uniform development, right and protection of all indigenous community can be deserved and hence suffering and crisis of such community within council is really unfortunate and time will raise question how much it is logical,.

All Assam Koch Rajbongshi Sanmilani was founded in 1912 and it was officially recognized in 1959-60 with the Govt. Regd. No. 91/1959-60. Manjula Devi was one of the Active members of All Assam Koch Rajbongshi Sanmilani. On behalf of Koch Rajbongshi Sanmilani, some active member of the Sanmilani along with Manjula Devi as a representative body of Koch Rajbongshi people submitted a Memorandum to the cabinet committee of Government of Assam at Dispur for inclusion of Koch-Rajbongshi Community in the list of Scheduled Tribes on 7th April, 1985. Name of those active members who played major role in submission of the memorandum were listed below:

1. Sd/- K.C. Roypradhani, President
2. Sd/- Ambika Charan Choudhury, W/President.
3. Sd/- Jitendra Nath Roy
4. Sd/- Rani Manjula Devi, Ex- MP, Ex-MLA
- 5.Sd/- Uday Das
6. Sd/- Kishori Mohan Sarkar.
7. Sd/- Dhruva Narayan Barua
8. Sd/- Kirti Dutta, MLA
9. Sd/- Arun Kumar Roy
10. Sd/- Harendra Narayan Dutta, Vice-President
11. Sd/- Tarun Bijay Ray

12. Sd/- Samarendra Nr. Barman
13. Sd/- Ramani Kanta Ray
14. Sd/- Lakhirdra Ray
15. Sd/- Jamini Mohan Barman
16. Sd/- Jibendra Narayan Sarkar
17. Sd/- Nilakanta Ray
18. Sd/- Mathura Mohan Choudhury
19. Sd/- Bhanu Bhusan Barman
20. Sd/- Khiteswar Koch, Vice President
21. Sd/- Madhusudhan Barman and many others.

Manjula Devi was also very fond of literature and had a great respect for Rabindranath Tagore who had a cordial relation with her father Rao Venkata Kumara Mahipat Surya Rau, the Raja of Pithapuram, a princely estate of Andhra Pradesh. And interestingly she purchased the House 'Solomon Vila' in Shillong which was going to be disposed of, where memory of Tagore consist in as he had spent more than two months at 'Solomon Vila'. She purchased the house and renamed it as 'Sidli House'. At the entrance of the house a plaque was engraved in the name of Tagore as a memorial.

Conclusion: Since British era to post independence, the women who positioned themselves as great instance in taking part in social activity, Manjula Devi was among them. It must be

admitted that Manjula Devi was one of the pioneer of revolutionary female leadership from then uncultivated west of Assam region. Being a queen of noble Koch dynasty she could had a luxury life and instead of that she wandered and kept working in integrating women of Assam from east to west for their right and legality. Hence we may recognize Queen Manjula Devi as the legendary woman activist of firmness who was able to shape up the woman empowerment and social quality in mid 19th Century.

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